

Oifig an Tánaiste agus Aire Gnóthaí Eachtracha agus Trádála
Office of the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade



Mr Edwin Poots MLA
The Speaker
Northern Ireland Assembly
The Speaker Room
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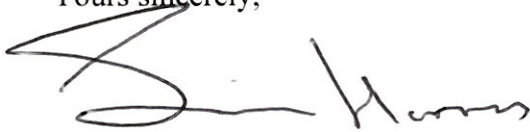
Dear Mr Speaker,

Thank you for your recent correspondence on the Northern Ireland Assembly motion in relation to the Election of the President of Ireland: Voting Rights, which was passed on to me by the Taoiseach.

A Private Members Bill on Extending Voting Rights in Presidential Elections to citizens in Northern Ireland and the diaspora was also debated in Dáil Éireann on 24 May. The Government did not oppose the motion.

As was noted during the debate, extending voting rights to citizens outside this jurisdiction would require a referendum and the Government continues to reflect on the matter.

Yours sincerely,



Simon Harris TD
Tánaiste
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**The Speaker**

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**An Taoiseach Micheál Martin TD
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12 May 2025

Dear Taoiseach,

During a sitting of the Northern Ireland Assembly on 06 May 2025, Members debated a Motion in relation to the Election of the President of Ireland: Voting Rights. The question was put on the motion and agreed to. It was resolved:

“That this Assembly notes that the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement recognises the birthright of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both; recalls that, in November 2013, the fifth report of the Convention on the Constitution recommended to give citizens resident outside the State the right to vote in presidential elections; further notes that Irish citizens living in Northern Ireland can stand for, and be elected as, president of Ireland but cannot vote in presidential elections; and calls on the Irish Government to implement the recommendation of the Convention on the Constitution with regards to voting rights in presidential elections, thereby extending the right to vote in elections for president of Ireland to all Irish citizens on the island of Ireland.”

I attach the relevant excerpt from the Official Report for your attention.

Yours sincerely,

**EDWIN POOTS MLA
SPEAKER**



Official Report
(Hansard)

Tuesday 6 May 2025
Volume 175, No 4

Election of the President of Ireland: Voting Rights

Mr Kearney: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes that the 1998

Belfast/Good Friday Agreement recognises the birthright of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both; recalls that, in November 2013, the fifth report of the Convention on the Constitution recommended to give citizens resident outside the State the right to vote in presidential elections; further notes that Irish citizens living in Northern Ireland can stand for, and be elected as, president of Ireland but cannot vote in presidential elections; and calls on the Irish Government to implement the recommendation of the Convention on the Constitution with regards to voting rights in presidential elections, thereby extending the right to vote in elections for president of Ireland to all Irish citizens on the island of Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to wind up. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Kearney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá mé breá sásta an rún seo a mholadh, ar ábhar atá ríthábhachtach agus fíorshuntasach do shaoránaigh Éireannacha anseo sna Sé Chontae. *[Translation: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am very happy to move this motion, which is on an extremely important and highly significant matter for Irish citizens here in the Six Counties.]* Sinn Féin urges all Assembly Members, regardless of their political perspective, to support the motion, which calls on the Irish Government to fulfil their responsibility and finally extend the right to vote in Irish presidential elections to the hundreds of thousands of Irish citizens living in the North of Ireland. It is finally time for an Irish Government to resolve that democratic deficit and to set the date for a referendum on allowing Irish citizens here to have their say in presidential elections. By speaking with one voice on the issue, our Assembly can powerfully affirm the principles of parity of esteem, mutual respect and equality in the Good Friday Agreement.

Central to the agreement of our peace settlement was the recognition of the birthright of every citizen in the North to identify as Irish, British or neither, if they so choose, and to be accepted as such. The agreement included a key provision that the Irish Government would amend article 2 of the Irish constitution, granting the right to full Irish citizenship. The duty of the Irish Government is established clearly under article 2, which underpins the birthright of everyone born on the island of Ireland

"to be part of the Irish Nation."

Equally, the right of those of us in the North who are Irish to identify as Irish citizens is recognised in the Good Friday Agreement.

Twelve years have passed since 2013, when the constitutional convention in Dublin voted overwhelmingly — by a margin of 78% — in support of extending the franchise to Irish citizens living in the North and abroad. That was an important recognition of the reality of hundreds of thousands of Irish citizens living in the North of Ireland and of the vast Irish diaspora that populates the globe: North America, Australia, the European Union and elsewhere. That position has been further endorsed by all the main parties in the Southern state.

Due to a lack of progress on the proposal to hold a referendum, Sinn Féin brought legislation to the Dáil in 2014 to give effect to the recommendations of the constitutional

convention on presidential voting rights. In 2017, the Irish Government agreed to a referendum on amending article 12 of the Irish constitution to meet their obligation, but no progress has been made on that to date. Notably, the 2020 Programme for Government contained a pledge to extend presidential voting rights to Irish citizens in the North and beyond, yet nothing was done about that. In another backward step, the current Government have failed to prioritise the extension of the franchise in presidential elections in their current Programme for Government. That is a regressive omission and a further denial of clearly defined and recognised rights of Irish citizenship, running counter to the popular democratic will of people across the island.

Here we are in 2025, with the presidential election on the horizon, and, despite years of promises and commitments from Dublin Governments, we are no further forward. Irish citizens in the North of Ireland are still disenfranchised from participation in the democratic process to elect the Irish head of state. That is in marked contrast to the welcome progress that has been made in the provision of other rights and equality measures across the Irish state. Consider, for example, 2015, when Ireland legalised equal marriage through a national referendum, following recommendations from the same Irish constitutional convention. Extending the franchise to all Irish citizens is an appropriate and proportionate constitutional position to adopt. Its introduction will be an important reflection of the momentum for constitutional change that has been gathering all over Ireland, North and South.

Moreover, the office of uachtarán na hÉireann, the president of Ireland, is held in hugely high regard and respect throughout the world. Recent international developments have shown that the office of the Irish president can have immense political, diplomatic and moral significance in the context of international relations. In a world that has shamefully remained silent during the ongoing genocide in Gaza, the current Irish president has shown courageous leadership in his appeal to world leaders to break their silence and call for a permanent ceasefire in Gaza. The incumbent president of Ireland has been an exemplar by using his office to make a true, meaningful difference as a strong advocate of the primacy of international law, multilateralism, peace and justice.

Irish citizens living in the North of Ireland should have the right to a say in the future role and influence of the Irish presidency. Our rights as full Irish citizens are fully guaranteed under the Good Friday Agreement and in the Irish constitution, but those rights are not being engaged. The unacceptable democratic deficit should end. The Irish Government should act now. There is no excuse for continued prevarication or delay. The right of Irish citizens in the North to vote in the next Irish presidential election must be progressed and delivered.

I sincerely hope that the Assembly will endorse this call with one voice on the basis of mutual respect and parity of esteem for all of us who share the Irish national identity in the North of Ireland.

Mr Brett: The House will be aware of the saying that impersonation is the greatest form of flattery. I am sure that the leader of Aontú in the Irish Republic will be impressed by Sinn Féin and the SDLP's having spent today trying to impersonate him. I am sure that Mr Tóibín is smirking and smiling as he sends both parties into a political tailspin. The leader of the SDLP has been on the radio today, putting forward the policies not of Hume or Mallon but of Vicky Pollard, in saying, "Yes, these people should have the extension of the right — no, they shouldn't — yes, but no, but yes, but no". The national chairman of Sinn Féin has been wheeled out to prove Sinn Féin's republican credentials, because it has not moved the debate on Irish unity forward one iota. Those parties have spent today arguing with themselves about who has advanced the cause of Irish unity more. Today, we heard the leader of the Opposition say that the SDLP had done more than any other party on strand

two. The Member for South Antrim said that Sinn Féin did that. Nationalism cannot even agree with itself on the issue.

The House and, indeed, those watching on television should be in no doubt that today's debate is about the fact that Aontú outsmarted, outmanoeuvred and out-greened Sinn Féin, which is using the debate as an echo chamber to cover up the failings of its republican movement. The former Steward of the Manor of Northstead, former Member of Parliament for West Belfast, Mr Gerry Adams, proclaimed to the world that Irish unity would be delivered by 2016.

The current president of Sinn Féin said, in light of the most recent Assembly election, that a border poll was inevitable, and the current First Minister changes the timeline depending on what day it is. What have they achieved? We have Sinn Féin bringing a motion to the Northern Ireland Assembly, begging the Irish Government to introduce a referendum. That shows how far forward the issue of presidential voting rights has moved.

4.00 pm

We on these Benches have huge respect for anyone who wishes to identify as Irish here in Northern Ireland, but it is clear that the Irish Government have absolutely zero interest in advancing the issue. The recently agreed Programme for Government by the parties in the Republic of Ireland makes no mention of it; they are not interested. More importantly, those who live in the Republic of Ireland have absolutely no interest in the issue either. Despite being told that the Taoiseach-in-waiting Mary Lou McDonald would herald in a change on the issue, the people in the Republic of Ireland rejected Sinn Féin in the recent Irish general election and re-elected the current Government. Polling last Sunday in the 'Sunday Independent' highlighted the issues that are of importance to those who live in the Republic of Ireland. Do you know what percentage of people in the poll were concerned about Irish presidential voting rights for those in Northern Ireland? Zero per cent. Do you know what percentage were interested in Irish unity? One per cent. The people of the Republic of Ireland, like the vast majority of those who live in Northern Ireland, are more interested in fixing the health service, delivering a world-class education system and sorting out the scandal around childcare. That is where the focus of the Assembly should ultimately be.

Be in no doubt: if the motion passes with the support of the Alliance Party, there will be no extension of voting rights tomorrow. It is simply not going to happen. The Member who spoke previously made reference to a democratic deficit. The president of the Irish Republic has no democratic legitimacy here in Northern Ireland, or in any other part of the United Kingdom. I respect the office of president. Whilst I may not have a huge amount of respect for the current office holder, I respect the office of president of the Irish Republic, just like —

Mr Brooks: Will the Member give way?

Mr Brett: I happily give way.

Mr Brooks: There has been talk of a democratic deficit. Does the Member agree that, if voting rights were extended to the Irish diaspora worldwide, which numbers tens if not hundreds of millions, the democratic deficit would fall on the people of the Irish Republic, who would be outnumbered by those living internationally?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): The Member's time is up, unfortunately. We have indicated from the Chair before that, if a Member takes an intervention before their time is up and their time then expires, they do not get the extra minute.

Ms Bradshaw: I support the motion. First, it is worth noting that the Belfast Agreement recognises that a person from Northern Ireland has the right to identify as British, Irish or

both. That refers to national identity, but subsequent legal tests have affirmed that it also applies to citizenship. As such, a person from Northern Ireland may hold British citizenship, Irish citizenship or both. That is reflected in their ability to hold an Irish passport, a British passport or both.

Secondly, it is worth noting that the Convention on the Constitution was very explicit that it was not choosing to extend voting rights in Irish presidential elections to Northern Ireland as an entity but, rather, to all Irish citizens. By definition, that includes any person from Northern Ireland who chooses to be so regarded. However, the proposal is specifically about the citizenry as whole. There is, therefore, no need for the final three words of the motion, and there would be no change to the constitutional or sovereign status of Northern Ireland. The proposal is simply for all Irish citizens to have a vote, full stop. That may seem technical, but it is important, because no one in Northern Ireland would be forced to participate.

We should note that there is already a difference in voting rights between presidential elections and Dáil elections, in that the former are already restricted to Irish citizens whereas the latter are open to any resident of the state. That distinction would be maintained under the proposal in that the added requirement to be resident of the state to vote in presidential elections would be removed. What the motion does not cover is the potential for the move to strengthen the agreement and to advance reconciliation on the island. Reconciliation requires recognition and acknowledgement of others' identities without that necessarily weakening our own. To put it another way, reconciliation requires a generosity of spirit that is too often absent from debates such as this in the Chamber.

It would be foolish to deny that there are not complications in the implementation of the convention's proposals. Realistically, we would be looking at the 2032 elections before any change were likely to come into effect. The details of how the inherent complexities would be ironed out need not be an issue for the Chamber. The principle is clear. Indeed, it is already the case that, in 11 of 14 EU member states where the head of state is directly elected, citizens who live externally have a vote.

We would prioritise the potential for such a move to be a further step down the road to embedding peace and reconciliation; a welcome and clear recognition that the Irish identity is chosen by many citizens here and that it is acknowledged and valued without in any way diminishing the identity and, importantly, the constitutional preference of those who exercise their right not to choose that identity. Ultimately, we do not all have to choose the same national identity, but we should all wish to respect the rights of everyone in our society to maximise the benefits of all strands of the agreement. In particular, my party and I strongly encourage others to recognise the fact that respecting everyone's rights in the spirit of genuine and meaningful reconciliation makes Northern Ireland stronger and more stable. We should not miss that opportunity today.

Mr O'Toole: I speak in strong support of the motion and welcome the fact that Sinn Féin Members have tabled it. It is an extremely important subject, on which it is entirely legitimate that the Assembly gets a chance to make its voice heard. While we disagree with Sinn Féin on some things, I strongly agree with the motion, and I am glad that we are debating it today. In answer to Mr Brett's question, I do not care what the origin is of the Bill that has been mooted in the Dáil; I care about the meat and substance of the issue.

In 1998, articles 2 and 3 of the constitution of Ireland, *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, were replaced — something for which, it is important to say, political unionism had called for decades — with new language, which I will briefly summarise. The replacement article 2 states:

"It is the entitlement and birthright of every person born in the island of Ireland, which includes its islands and seas, to be part of the Irish Nation."

That relates to nationhood and identity. Paula Bradshaw covered the fact that subsequent court cases have clarified that that can be understood to mean citizenship, which is part of the reason why people in Northern Ireland, including many people from non-traditional unionist backgrounds, non-traditional nationalist backgrounds and unionist backgrounds, are applying for Irish passports. Indeed, I have a healthy trade in my office in signing those forms.

The new article 3 from 1998 states:

"It is the firm will of the Irish nation, in harmony and friendship, to unite all the people who share the territory of the island of Ireland, in all the diversity of their identities and traditions, recognising that a united Ireland shall be brought about only by peaceful means with the consent of a majority of the people".

In 2025, it is time to give fuller meaning and expression to what, 27 years ago, were new clauses in the Irish constitution. Extending the right to participate in presidential elections to people resident in the North is an entirely sensible and legitimate expression of new articles 2 and 3. Although I and my party are strongly in favour of a new and united Ireland — an Ireland without an international border — that is based on reconciliation, pluralism and uniting the island's people, you do not have to believe in that vision to support or be sympathetic to the motion. It does not prejudice the outcome of any future referendum, even if my view is completely prejudged.

This place, Northern Ireland, is part of the island of Ireland. One of the developments that we have seen somewhat uncomfortably in the past little while is a new definition. Occasionally, it has felt as though the primary and senior meaning of the word "Ireland" is the state rather than the island. For those of us who live in this part of Ireland and want to participate not just in the broader Irish nation but in politics on a cross-border and all-island way, it is time that we had the opportunity to vote in presidential elections. It is not a strange or unique idea. As has been said, in multiple other countries around the world, including some in Europe, such as France and Poland, non-resident citizens — that is, citizens of the state who are not resident in the precise jurisdiction — are able to vote in presidential elections.

It is also true that, for 14 of the past 20 years, the president of Ireland was from Belfast. She was somebody from Mr Brett's constituency, in fact, and a brilliant president she was. She built bridges with the unionist people of this island. I do not think that having people of the North voting in a presidential election threatens anybody's identity or vision of the future.

I have spent more of my adult life living on the island of Britain than the island of Ireland. I am now a politician here, and I make no apology for wanting to unite the people of this island in a new Ireland, but I will always be respectful not just of the unionist tradition but of many unionist people's relationship with the royal family and the monarch. I want them to be respectful of the fact that many of us would like to live in a republic and that many of us think that the true gold standard of citizenship is being able to choose your head of state. Many people in this part of Ireland, be they those from unionist or nationalist backgrounds or those who are somewhere in between or who simply do not care, would very much like to choose their president and choose a president of Ireland. It is an entirely sensible measure.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Your time is up now, Mr O'Toole.

Mr O'Toole: I support the motion.

Mr Butler: I sense that quite a bit of emotion and history is tied up in the issue. I acknowledge that, because, as we know, in this little place that I call home, Northern Ireland, identity matters, and people across these islands feel connected in many different ways. We have to be clear at the start of the debate that deciding who votes for the president of Ireland is not a matter for the Assembly. It is a matter, first and foremost, for the Irish voters in the Republic of Ireland and, therefore, their Parliament to decide.

To be fair, as has been recognised, this is not a new debate. The issue has come up in the Dáil and the Seanad several times over this past decade. There has even been draft legislation brought forward and a commitment to a referendum, but, so far, there has been no vote. Concerns have been raised by legislators and commentators in the Republic around the constitution, how people would register, how to verify voters who are abroad and what the political consequences would mean. Even in the Republic, the issue is far from settled.

Some have also questioned whether it makes sense to expand the vote for a role that holds limited powers. If you are not expanding what the president could do, for instance, you have to ask what you really gain by expanding who gets to choose them. It risks watering down the symbolism even further. Let us not pretend that expanding the electorate would not affect the kind of candidates who step forward. If you broaden the vote, you could also see pressure to rethink how candidates are nominated. What sorts of names would end up on that ballot paper? I say this with no cautionary sense of humour: if the vote stretches far enough for someone such as Conor McGregor, you could find his name in a race to be president. Whatever your view of him, he is hardly the kind of calm, unifying figure that you would associate with the responsibilities of a head of state. That idea may raise eyebrows, but that is the whole point. If the question is asked, the question is asked. When you change who votes, you can change what is possible.

Let me be respectful but firm. It is not a matter for us to decide. It is a matter for the voters in the Republic and their elected representatives. However, if they proceed with it, I suggest that they think even more broadly about including the wider Irish diaspora. There are more than 100,000 Irish-born citizens in Australia alone. If inclusion is the goal, let it include everyone, and let it be done through secure electronic voting without the need for polling stations. Our role is perhaps not to shape the debate but to watch with interest.

4.15 pm

Ms Ennis: I will start by addressing some mistruths, the first of which was from Matthew O'Toole. I contend that Mary McAleese is a County Down woman, as opposed to a North Belfast woman.

Mr O'Toole: She was when she was president.

Ms Ennis: Rostrevor, to be precise.

The second mistruth was from Phillip Brett and the DUP. Despite what you may want to believe, Irish citizens living in the North are part of the Irish nation and share its identity and culture, yet we are denied a voice in choosing the president, who is a head of state representing all Irish people, not just those in the South.

Extending the presidential franchise to Irish citizens in the North would affirm their equal citizenship, reflect the all-island nature of the place in which we all live and demonstrate a meaningful commitment to inclusion. Those principles were enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement and supported broadly by people, North and South. Irish citizens in the North are being denied a basic right — the right to vote in presidential elections — yet those same citizens can stand for the office of president.

What kind of democracy allows someone to run for the highest office in the land but denies them a vote in the process?

The Assembly knows well the promise of the Good Friday Agreement, which is an international treaty that was voted on by the people of this island, North and South. It guarantees the right of all the people of the North to identify and be accepted as Irish, British or both. That right is not conditional or partial; it is absolute. However, recognition without rights is hollow. Today, in 2025, Irish citizens in the North, in places such as Newry, Belfast and Derry, cannot vote for their own president. They can stand for election as president, but they cannot cast a vote. That is a democratic deficit. It is unacceptable, and it needs to change.

Let us be clear: what is proposed in the motion is not radical, and it is not unprecedented. It is normal in countries that respect their citizens, wherever they live. The North of Ireland and Irish citizens in this part of our island have profoundly shaped Irish sporting and cultural identity, excelling in Gaelic games, boxing, music and literature. Former Irish president Mary McAleese, a fellow County Down woman, symbolises that influence. How ironic and absurd, then, that someone from County Down can be the president but cannot vote for the president. So much of what we know and recognise as Irish culture and identity hails from this part of our island. It is long past time that those who have helped shape our identity in the past have a say in how we are represented in the future.

In 2013, the Convention on the Constitution recommended giving citizens living outside the state the right to vote in presidential elections, including Irish citizens in the North. However, over a decade later, successive Irish Governments in Dublin have failed to act, dragging their feet, making excuses and treating people in the North like second-class citizens. Successive Irish Governments have expressed support for Northern inclusion in the democratic process for electing the head of state. Now we need to see that commitment turned into action through the delivery of voting rights. We all share the goal of an inclusive Ireland, but it is time that the Irish Government matched warm words with action by extending the voting franchise to citizens in the North. We want to work with the Government to make sure that no Irish citizen is left voiceless when choosing their president.

Mr Dickson: At the beginning of the debate, I need to make a declaration of interest. I am the chair of the Council for Democratic Elections, which is a constituent body of the Venice Commission — the international organisation that, through its independent experts, vets and verifies electoral law and electoral law changes. Both the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland are signatories to that international treaty. As such, Ireland will be required to submit any changes to electoral law in advance. One matter to take note of is that the Venice Commission has set a very clear standard for changes in electoral law. It states that no changes should be made in the year in which an election is scheduled except in the most urgent of circumstances.

Many states across Europe and around the world have arrangements in place for out-of-country voting, including the United Kingdom. It is interesting that Ireland has some of the most restrictive out-of-country voting regulations. For example, in order to allow out-of-state Irish passport holders to vote, substantial amendment to the current Irish voting regulations will be required, not to mention a change to the Irish constitution by referendum.

Let me turn to what the motion represents. It is about fixing a democratic anomaly that should have been resolved quite some time ago. I met some young people in my constituency recently — bright and politically engaged students from Carrickfergus Grammar School and Ulster University — who looked at situations like this and asked the perfectly reasonable question: why can someone from Northern Ireland be

president of Ireland but not be able to vote in that election? Do you know what? They are right, because it does not make any sense.

The motion is not about proposing some radical change. It is about squaring a basic circle of democracy. The principle is simple: if you are eligible to hold an office and if you wish to have, as the Good Friday Agreement gives you, the right to be recognised as a citizen of Ireland, you should be eligible to vote for that office. That is simply democracy 101. The Good Friday Agreement was not just about ending our violence. It was about building a normal and shared functioning society, where rights are not just theoretical but real and meaningful. Yet, here we are, nearly an entire generation later, still having to point out those issues. That tells you all that you need to know about how far we still have to go.

I do understand that some in the Chamber may have concerns, but let us be clear about what the motion is not. It is not about changing borders or sovereignty, nor is it about diminishing anyone's identity. It is simply about making sure that when we talk about rights and identities in this place, we mean actual, tangible rights that people can exercise. Twelve years ago, the Irish Government's own Convention on the Constitution, made up of ordinary citizens and experts, looked at the issue and said clearly that they wanted a change. To those who might oppose the motion, I will ask you to consider this: if we truly believe in the principles of the 1998 agreement and if we genuinely want to build a society where all identities are respected equally, we should have the confidence to support this small but important step forward for those who wish to participate in Irish presidential elections.

Mr Brooks: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: Yes.

Mr Brooks: Does the Member agree that, if we are going to respect all Irish citizens, those Irish citizens in Northern Ireland should not be treated any differently? They are not more Irish, for instance, than those Irish-born citizens in New York, Sydney or London. Northern Ireland should not be treated as a special case in that regard. If the franchise is to be extended to the Irish diaspora, it should be done internationally.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Dickson: Thank you very much. I do not disagree. That is a debate not for this Chamber but for the Irish Government and for a referendum going forward.

At the end of the day, this is not just about politics but about people. It is about every person, young or old, who wants an opportunity to participate in the democratic life of Ireland and on this island. It is about everyone who wants to see the promises of the Good Friday Agreement made real in their everyday lives. Today, if this motion passes, it sends a message that, in Northern Ireland, we take all identities and all democratic rights seriously. It is up to the Government in Dublin: if they wish to hold a referendum and to change the electoral law to allow for those who wish to vote in presidential elections to do so, the right is theirs to do so.

Mr Gaston: In many ways, the motion in the Order Paper today sums up the problem with the wretched Belfast Agreement. The Belfast Agreement was sold to unionists as a settlement. We were told that, if you swallow the pill of murderers being released from prison, if you accept that the IRA's political wing will have a place at the heart of government forever in Northern Ireland, if you tolerate our getting rid of the RUC after it sacrificed more than 300 officers and if you give the Irish Republic a say in how Northern Ireland is run through powerful cross-border bodies, that will be all. After that, you unionists

can have peace. We will have an agreed basis on which Northern Ireland can move forward.

In case there be any doubt about the constitutional position, well, just look at paragraph 1 of annex A to the agreement. It is there in black and white, and it states:

"It is hereby declared that Northern Ireland in its entirety remains part of the United Kingdom and shall not cease to be so without the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland".

Members, thankfully, unionism is starting to waken up in increasing numbers, having worked out that the constitutional guarantee in the wretched Belfast Agreement was a con.

Before Christmas, the nationalist and republican Alliance Party joined forces with Sinn Féin and the SDLP to support the Uniondismantling protocol, and I see from the contributions today that —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Mr Gaston —.

Mr Gaston: — they are going to join forces again.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Mr Gaston, you are almost two minutes into your speech. Could you start to address the motion in the Order Paper, please?

Mr Gaston: Thank you very much. I am just going back to the Belfast Agreement, as that is belt and braces —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): No, could you go back, Mr Gaston? Mr Gaston, resume your seat. You have been asked this clearly, and I will repeat it more slowly: could you, please, address the context of the motion in the Order Paper?

Mr Gaston: Mr Deputy Speaker, I have read the motion — I accept that it is different in other people's Order Paper — and it notes and talks about the Belfast Agreement and elections in the South. That is the basis of my take on the wretched Belfast Agreement. Just to reinforce the issue about the Belfast Agreement, what we had last week was, again, the protocol and the noose tightening with the commencement of the parcels regulations.

I will move on, Mr Deputy Speaker. Today, we have a motion that calls for the people of this part of the United Kingdom to be given the right to elect a foreign head of state. If voting rights for election of the president of the Irish Republic were involved in the Belfast Agreement, I would like someone to spell that out to me this afternoon, but, of course, that is not the case.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gaston: I will indulge the Member.

Mr O'Toole: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Notwithstanding some of his remarks about it being a foreign head of state — he is entitled to make that statement, but, obviously, I do not agree with that — for the purposes of information, can he tell me how I can go about voting for the head of the UK state? That is not entirely clear to me. Could he advise me on how I can do that?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Gaston: Thank you very much. The Member usually comes in and gives something valid to the cut and thrust of the argument, but he has lost me with his intervention today. I see that he is smiling. He thinks that it was a good intervention. He has got it on the record in Hansard.

I will move back to the thrust of my speech. The Belfast Agreement was never about a settlement. It was always about a process. Some sought to dress it up by calling it the peace process — hmm, hmm — but any process always has an end point. There is always an objective to a process, so what is it? Members, it is a united Ireland, and all the Belfast Agreement is about is getting unionists to the point where there is minimal fuss. The TUV has always recognised that. Some who once said the same sold their principles for the baubles of office. They jumped on the process train some years ago without any thought for the fact that it was a one-way trip to Dublin. However, on behalf of my party, I certainly will not be supporting the motion or the process that has led us to this place. No doubt we will hear more nationalist demands, aided and abetted by their friends in the Alliance Party, through these non-binding motions in the weeks and months ahead.

Mr Carroll: It should be uncontroversial to say that everyone living in Ireland should have the right to vote for the Irish president, but that is obviously not the case. Several hundred thousand Irish citizens in Belfast, Derry and across the North are being denied their basic democratic rights in elections on this island.

That shows flagrant disregard for the will of Irish citizens, North and South.

As we have heard, over 70% of members of the 2013 Convention on the Constitution believed that residents in the North should have the right to vote in presidential elections, and the suggestion that people in the South do not care about the North is, frankly, nonsense. People in the North watch and listen to presidential debates and programming on RTÉ and other channels, if they are not geoblocked, so it seems completely unfair and nonsensical that citizens are not allowed to put that information to practical use at the ballot box.

People Before Profit recognises that the powers of the Irish president are limited and that the president holds limited discretionary powers that act as a check on the power of Parliament. In practice, those powers are rarely used. In effect, the president of Ireland is a ceremonial head of state, but being above politics allows the head of state more political freedom of expression, and, as has been said, the current president, Michael D Higgins, has been a key voice in Ireland throughout his tenure. He has been an outspoken critic of the neoliberal economic hegemony of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, and he has rightly characterised the housing crisis as state failure and a disaster.

He vocally supports Irish neutrality, which is increasingly being eroded by those in power who want Ireland to abandon its anti-colonial history and align with NATO, which is an imperial military alliance that is responsible for the murder of millions of civilians. He also opposed a constitutional ban on abortion services decades before other politicians finally decided to get with the programme.

4.30 pm

Whilst recognising the limitations of the office of president, we should appreciate that Ireland is not a monarchy. The Irish head of state is democratically elected and is, therefore, accountable to the electorate, unlike the British royal family. Michael D Higgins's popularity stands in stark contrast to the platform that is given to left-wing parties in the Dáil and in the media. That does not mean that people prefer their socialist politics to be in the form of abstract speeches delivered by a ceremonial head of state who has little power. The popularity of Michael D Higgins suggests that the people of Ireland have an appetite for

leftwing and socialist ideas and politics that is not being satisfied by the political establishment, North and South.

On the point about Conor McGregor, his politics are, to put it mildly, extremely dangerous, worrying and damaging. It is worth the Member for Lagan Valley noting that a poll from the 'Sunday Independent' — that radical newspaper — showed that just 7% of people would vote for him in the presidential elections, even if he were eligible to stand.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I call Emma Sheerin to conclude and make a winding-up speech on the motion. You have up to 10 minutes.

Ms Sheerin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. [*Translation: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.*] I doubt that I will need 10 minutes. I thank all Members for what was a lively, informative and worthwhile debate. We tabled the motion to try to progress rights, equality and inclusion. That is the thrust of the motion's objective.

I am an Irish woman who lives in Ireland. As others have stated, that right was formalised in the Good Friday Agreement. Twenty-seven years later, we can still see that Irish citizens in the North do not have the same rights as other people who live just across the border. That is something that we would like to correct.

While I am correcting things, I will say that although, like the Member to my right, I am not particularly bothered about whose idea it was, it is important to note that Sinn Féin brought legislation to the Oireachtas regarding the extension of voting rights to citizens in the North before Aontú had even been established as a political party. So, it is something that we have long felt was important.

It is something that I would like to see all parties supporting, because rights are not exclusive, and increasing rights for one group does not mean that anybody else has less access to rights. Even if it is something that you do not feel that you are going to have any interest in and you do not feel that you will ever want to vote in an Irish presidential election, allowing others to do so does not affect you negatively. You never know: at some point, you might see a candidate that changes your mind, gives you an interest and makes you want to get involved.

As has been outlined by others, the present head of state gives a voice to the Irish nation on an international stage. As others have said, we have clearly seen the importance of that in the context of the genocide in Gaza and the bravery and courage of our Irish president in putting words to the feelings of so many of us. He articulated very clearly the views of the vast majority of Irish people in completely condemning the actions of the Israeli state and the murder of innocent civilians and children and stating how we stand with the Palestinian people and send our solidarity to them. We see our own struggle reflected in what is currently happening to those living in the Gaza Strip. We rely on our heads of state to do that for us.

As has been said, the Irish head of state is democratically elected. Others have a head of state who is not democratically elected, and that is totally fine. As has been said, the Good Friday Agreement set a very clear formalised arrangement whereby, in the North of Ireland, you can be Irish, British, both or neither. All those options are open to all of us and they are all totally acceptable. I am Irish, and I would like to be able to elect my Irish president.

Mr Kingston: Will the Member give way?

Ms Sheerin: I will take a point.

Mr Kingston: The Member talks about the Good Friday Agreement and subsequent agreements. Does she accept, though, that they also make clear that Northern Ireland remains part of the United Kingdom by the will of the people? Whatever the Republic of Ireland chooses to do regarding passports, the territory of Northern Ireland remains part of the United Kingdom.

A territory cannot have two heads of state. Our head of state remains the King. The Republic chooses to give passports to people who live outside the Republic of Ireland, but, even as passport holders, those people do not necessarily have all the rights of residency. Northern Ireland remains part of the United Kingdom, and we cannot have two heads of state.

Ms Sheerin: I thank the Member for his intervention. I absolutely accept that the Good Friday Agreement sets it out clearly that it is down to the will of the people whether there should be constitutional change. The motion is not about constitutional change, and the King is not my head of state. I urge Members to support the motion and remind them that it is not about the constitutional question; it is about extending the right to vote for the Irish president to Irish people who live in the North.

Mr Kearney: Will the Member give way?

Ms Sheerin: I will indeed.

Mr Kearney: Does the Member agree that some of the interventions from other Members have been unfortunate in the manner in which they have sought to deflect from the character of the motion and that there is, in fact, an opportunity for every Member in the Chamber, including our colleagues from the DUP, to powerfully, along with the rest of us, affirm the principles of parity of esteem, equality and mutual respect for Members and people across society who define themselves as Irish citizens? Rather than engaging in churlish remarks that deflect, there is an opportunity for them to stand with us today and indemnify the rights of Irish citizens across the state.

Ms Sheerin: Absolutely. The Member has articulated clearly the point that I was trying to make about the view of the motion and what the Chamber endorsing it would say. It is about an extension of rights, which we should all support.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 46; Noes 25.

AYES

Dr Archibald, Ms K Armstrong, Mr Baker, Mr Boylan, Ms Bradshaw, Miss Brogan, Mr Carroll, Mr Delargy, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Donnelly, Ms Egan, Ms Ennis, Ms Ferguson, Ms Finnegan, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Mrs Guy, Mr Honeyford, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Mr Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr McAleer, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Mr McMurray, Mr McReynolds, Mrs Mason, Mr Mathison, Mr Muir, Ms Mulholland,

Ms Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Ms Nicholl, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Reilly, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Mr Tennyson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mrs Dillon and Mr McHugh

NOES

*Mr Bradley, Mr Brett, Mr Brooks, Ms Brownlee,
Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Ms Bunting,
Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr
Dunne, Mrs Erskine, Ms Forsythe, Mr Frew, Mr
Gaston, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Kingston, Mrs Little-Pengelly, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen,
Mr
Martin, Mr Middleton, Mr Robinson, Ms Sugden.*

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Brett and Mr Kingston

Ms Bradshaw acted as a proxy for Ms Nicholl.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

*That this Assembly notes that the 1998
Belfast/Good Friday Agreement recognises the birthright of all the people of Northern
Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both; recalls that, in
November 2013, the fifth report of the Convention on the Constitution recommended to give
citizens resident outside the State the right to vote in presidential elections; further notes
that Irish citizens living in Northern Ireland can stand for, and be elected as, president of
Ireland but cannot vote in presidential elections; and calls on the Irish Government to
implement the recommendation of the Convention on the Constitution with regards to voting
rights in presidential elections, thereby extending the right to vote in elections for president
of Ireland to all Irish citizens on the island of Ireland.*

Mr O'Toole: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. On a previous occasion when a motion was passed in the Assembly with a call for the Irish Government or for Dáil Éireann more broadly, I believe that a letter went from the Speaker to the Irish Government. I just wondered if the Speaker's Office could advise on whether that precedent will be followed in this case.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Thank you, Mr O'Toole. I will take that query to the Speaker's Office and ask that you be advised of the outcome. That concludes that matter. I ask Members to take their before we move to the next item in the Order Paper.

(Madam Principal Deputy Speaker in the Chair)

Motion made: